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DE RUEHVJ #0142/01 0411737

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FM AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1390

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 000142

NOFORN

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2020

TAGS: PREL MARR BK

SUBJECT: BOSNIA: ARMED FORCES FACE DOWN GRAVE CRISIS

Classified By: Amb. Charles English for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Minister of Defense Selmo Cikotic described to Ambassador, January 30, what he considered to be the greatest threat to the command, discipline and unity of Bosnia's Armed Forces since the creation of a unified command and Ministry of Defense in 2006. Prompted by veterans associations and politicians, uniformed soldiers in Bosnia's Armed Forces met to plan illegal protests of the release of 2,700 soldiers who have reached the service age limit. Chief of Defense Miladin Milojcic, a Bosnian-Serb, informed the Minister that if the protests took place, there was a credible threat that Bosnian-Serb soldiers would "withdraw from the Armed Forces until the crisis was resolved," in effect, a mutiny. Resolute action of Bosnia's united defense leadership ultimately stopped the protests, but the breakdown of command along ethnic lines, recourse to political parties and religious leaders, and failure of the collective Presidency to take action as Commander-in-Chief all illustrated the fragility of Bosnia's oft-touted defense reform. End summary.

Background: Soldiers Laid-Off

¶12. (SBU) The MOD is in the process of terminating the contracts of 2,700 soldiers -- nearly half the infantry -- who will have reached the legal age limit of 35 for enlisted soldiers. Although this age limit was called for by the 2005 defense law that brought Bosnia's Armed Forces under a unified command, most soldiers have been extended twice, notwithstanding the age limit. Minister of Defense Selmo Cikotic told us that he could not extend the soldiers again, as many were in their forties and the age limit was critical to the modernization and training of the armed forces. Cikotic acknowledged that the timing is bad, as Bosnia weathers an economic downturn which is depressing wages and employment as well as the ability of Bosnia's government to provide social welfare. Nevertheless, Cikotic claims that extending the soldiers again would only prolong and exacerbate the problem, which grows as more and more (war-time) soldiers reach the age limit.

Political Parties Incite Protests

¶13. (S/NF) In early January, Bosnia's Ministry of Defense and Joint Staff learned that members of the Armed Forces were coordinating a march to be held in Sarajevo on January 11, to demonstrate against the termination of soldiers. It is illegal in Bosnia for active soldiers to organize or

participate in protests against the government. According to defense officials, the organization of the protest was largely, although not exclusively, a Bosniak affair. It began seemingly with the acquiescence of some commanding officers in the Bosniak Battalion in Bosnia's Fifth Brigade, the largely Bosniak brigade located in Tuzla under the command of (Bosniak) General Senad Masovic. Ministry sources tell us that leaders of the Federation veterans union had committed to assisting logically in the protest. The (Bosnian-Croat) Deputy Minister of Defense, Marina Pendas, strongly implied to us that members of the new political party of Bosniak Media mogul Fahrudin Radoncic, Alliance for a Better Future (SBB), had helped to incite the protests, presumably to discredit the leadership of Defense Minister Selmo Cikotic, who belongs to the strongest Bosniak party, the Party for Democratic Action (SDA). Cikotic said in a later press release, "Unfortunately, some irresponsible political forces who declare themselves pro-Bosnian encourage lawlessness purely because of narrow party and political interests."

Serbs Seizing Opportunity

¶4. (S/NF) According to several sources, when acting CHOD Rizvo Pleh learned of the planned protests, he immediately contacted Chief of Defense Miladin Milojcic who was on holiday in Banja Luka in observance of Orthodox Christmas. During that trip, press photographed Milojcic and Deputy Minister of Defense Zivko Marjanac (the two ranking Bosnian-Serbs in the state defense institutions) meeting with

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RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik. That day, Milojcic called Cikotic and told him that Bosnian-Serb soldiers would not demonstrate on January 11, and that if soldiers of other ethnicities did demonstrate, Bosnian-Serb soldiers would "be withdrawn" from the Armed Forces. All of our sources, including the Minister, have indicated their belief that Milojcic was informing, rather than threatening, the Minister. No one has told us exactly who would call on Bosnian-Serb soldiers to withdraw. (Comment: As Chief of Defense of all Bosnia's soldiers, we could hope for better from Milojcic. One the one hand, he claims to be able to prevent only Bosnian Serb soldiers from protesting. On the other, he implies that he cannot (or will not) stop Bosnian Serb soldiers from withdrawing. End comment.)

Presidency Fails to Act As Commander-in-Chief

¶5. (S/NF) Once Cikotic learned of the protests and the threat of withdrawal of Bosnian-Serbs, he called Chairman of the Presidency (Bosnian-Croat member) Zeljko Komsic. Komsic told Cikotic that he needed to fix the situation and speculated that if Bosnian-Serbs withdrew, the military and country could collapse. Cikotic also tried, but was initially unable, to contact the other members of the Presidency, (Bosniak) Haris Silajdzic and (Bosnian Serb) Nebojsa Radmanovic, although we do not know if he eventually succeeded. In any case, neither the Presidency nor any member of the Presidency took any action as Commander-in-Chief to speak against the proposed protests or suggest that any attempt to organize a protest would be insubordination, if not mutiny or desertion.

Reluctant Support from Bosniak Parties

¶6. (C/NF) Cikotic told the Ambassador that he briefed his party, Party for Democratic Action (SDA), on his proposal to stop the protests, but had to argue for its support. Various sources told us that Cikotic briefed SDA's Defense Board, and met with Vice Chairman of SDA, Asim Sarajlic, to explain the threat. Cikotic told Ambassador that at first Sarajlic was reluctant "to be seen on the wrong side of the problem" in an

election year. The SDA defense board asked the Minister what possibilities there were for extending the soldiers again, and were at first undecided about supporting the Minister in suppressing the protest. Cikotic claimed that he eventually convinced the SDA Defense Board and Sarajlic of the reasons for the dismissals, called for by the Defense Law, and the seriousness of the threat to the Armed Forces if there was not clear action halting the protests. Cikotic told Ambassador that he argued to SDA, "If you don't stand up for the unified Armed Forces, who will?", implying a Bosniak interest in supporting state institutions -- and therefore the state itself -- greater than that of other ethnic groups.

¶ 7. (C/NF) On January 8, SDA issued a press release expressing support for state institutions that were trying to solve the problem of soldiers whose contracts were expiring and added: "The announced disturbance of the integrity of the Armed Forces of and BiH's defense sector would represent an attack against the country's path to EU and NATO membership, as well as an attack against the state itself." To date, no press outlet has mentioned the threat that Bosnian Serb soldiers would withdraw from the Armed Forces if the protests took place. Sarajlic told us, some days later, that he commended Cikotic for the action he took with respect to the protests, but admitted that Cikotic was now in poor standing among many SDA officials. Cikotic's staff told us during the crisis that Cikotic also appealed to Social Democratic Party (SDP) President Zlatko Lagumdzija to ask him to not politicize action taken to halt the protest in an effort to discredit Cikotic or SDA, "because in this case the threat to the state was too great to use for political gain."

Reis Ceric Weighs In

¶ 8. (C/NF) Cikotic also told Ambassador that the leader of Bosnia's Islamic community, Reis ul-ulema Mustafa Ceric, was supportive of the soldiers who planned to protest, saying "How can you do this to Muslims?" Afraid that criticism by Ceric would undermine his attempts to quell the protest,

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Cikotic called on the Mufti of the Armed Forces to intervene with Ceric, who was ultimately quiet as the Ministry acted to stop the protest.

Defense Ministry Takes Action

¶ 9. (S/NF) Having received a blessing (and a positive press statement) from his party and the tacit agreement of Lagumdzija and Reis Ceric not to openly criticize his efforts, Cikotic chaired a briefing January 8 along with the (Croat and Serb) Deputy Ministers, all 13 Generals, all Commanders down to the battalion level and all Ministry staff to the Department Head level to send clear instructions to all soldiers that it was illegal for them to organize or protest against the Government of Bosnia, and to clearly set out punishment (dishonorable discharge with no severance benefits) for soldiers who protest or commanders who acquiesce to the protest or its organization. Bosnian-Serb Deputy Minister of Defense Zivko Marjanac stated during the briefing that if the protest occurred, it would mean that Bosnia had no military.

¶ 10. (S/NF) Ultimately, protest organizers agreed to call off the protest on January 11, but reporting indicated that future protests would be planned if the soldiers' demands were not met. Cikotic agreed to meet with four soldiers representing those dismissed to discuss ways that the Ministry of Defense could assuage the difficulties of their transition to civilian life, a move criticized by generals in his staff who did not want to begin a precedent of negotiations with soldiers whose contracts had ended. However, General Pleh told us that military intelligence, in

coordination with state level intelligence and law enforcement services, immediately began criminal investigations into the role of organizers and commanding officers in planning the protests. While the investigation remains incomplete, that has helped stave off further efforts to organize protests as the remaining soldiers prepare to leave service, opined Pleh's chief of staff.

Comment

¶11. (C/NF) The defense reforms of 2006 which brought Bosnia's military under a unified command and Ministry of Defense are often touted as the most successful reforms since Dayton. This has been the second test of that command structure. (The first was in May 2009, when RS Prime Minister Dodik, speaking outside a supermarket, glibly called on Serb soldiers to desert the NATO exercise in Georgia. Milojcic acted quickly in that case to assure the Minister that Serb soldiers would obey their lawful orders, and Dodik's staff told us that his comment was not thought-out or serious.) In the end of the day, the defense structures worked with unity to stave off a protest that would have amounted to mass disobedience and illegal action on the part of Bosnia's soldiers. Nonetheless, the potential boycott, the threat of Serb soldiers leaving, the Minister's need to win over his party and the head of Bosnia's Islamic community, and the recourse to ethnic power bases rather than the legal chain of command show the fragility of Bosnia's defense reform.

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